

# 13 Retelling and Responding to Texts

When we read, each of us brings a unique set of background experiences to the task. Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) tells us reading is a transaction between the reader and the text; that each reader interprets a text uniquely, depending on his or her knowledge, experience, perspectives, and understandings. When we invite readers to respond to reading, we invite them to create and share their own understandings of the text.

The most basic level of reader response is the literal retelling, which asks students to recall as many details from the story as they can. This is an important strategy at the early reading level, as it builds foundations of comprehension and story structure that can be extended into inferential interpretations at higher levels.

Summarizing is a more sophisticated level of retelling, in that it involves analyzing the information in the story to extract only the key ideas. In order to summarize, the reader needs a comprehensive understanding of the story. The reader must be able to discern key ideas, combine ideas, and eliminate extraneous details.

The highest level of response is the synthesis of information from the text with the reader's own ideas. Whether it is a critique, an analysis, an interpretation, or a connection, the personal response is generally associated with higher-level thinking. Even the youngest readers can offer support for an opinion or make personal connections. We want to encourage our more sophisticated readers to extend their thinking with inferences and interpretations of the text.

## Retelling

Retelling requires the reader to organize text information in order to provide a personal rendition of it. Retelling has been found to significantly improve story comprehension, sense of story structure, and oral language complexity (Koskinen et al, 1988, p. 892).

As a comprehension strategy, retelling

- encourages readers to attend to the meaning of the text.
- reinforces elements of story structure, such as characters, setting, and plot
- requires readers to distinguish between key ideas and supporting details
- encourages communication and oral language development

As an assessment strategy, retelling

- demonstrates what the student understands and remembers about the story
- reveals what the student considers important about the story
- indicates what students know about story structure and literary language
- demonstrates the students' vocabulary and oral language development

*Take time to teach! It is important to teach students how to retell a story, and what will be expected of their retelling.*

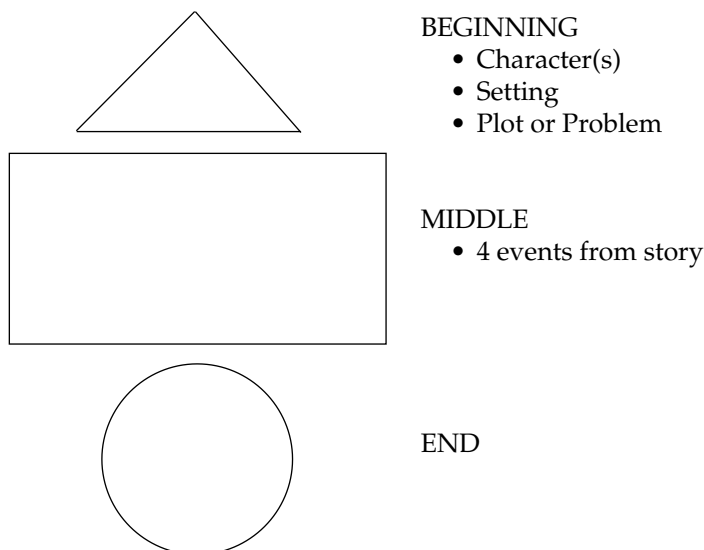
Retellings may be oral or written, but oral retellings allow the child to focus on the story rather than the writing. Emergent and early readers should be expected to retell stories orally; written retellings may be used with more advanced readers. Observing an oral retelling enables the teacher to observe the student's behavior during retelling and to provide any necessary prompting.

It is important to teach students how to retell a story, and what will be expected of their retelling. Group retellings of read-alouds and shared book experiences can build comprehension strategies and understanding of story elements. Graphic organizers or props such as pictures or puppets may also be used to aid retelling.

### *Tools for Retelling*

#### SHAPE-GO MAP

The Shape-Go Map below was created by Vicki Benson and Carrice Cummings (2000) to help readers organize their thinking for retelling. The triangle, a square, and a circle, represent the beginning, middle, and end of a story. For young students, the shapes can be color coded using traffic-light colors: green for Beginning, yellow for Middle, and red for End.



From *The Power of Retelling* by Vicki Benson and Carisse Cummings (Wright Group, 2000).

The three sides of the triangle are a reminder to identify the characters, setting, and plot or problem. The four sides of the rectangle remind the reader to tell about four key events in the story. The circle at the end reminds the reader that the end of the story should circle back to the beginning and solve the problem.

#### STORY MAP

A story map can be any form of graphic organizer that guides the student in identifying the elements of the story.

- Story Stars (see BLM page 127) remind students of rising action in a story.
- Using the Story House on page 128, students are able to sketch each story element in the windows of the house. Fold back the flaps of the windows and

*A Story Glove is a retelling aid that can be made simply and inexpensively by drawing symbols of different literary elements (character, problem, solution) on the fingers of a gardening glove.*

glue another piece of paper behind the house, so you can open the windows to see the ideas beneath.

*Creative dramatics may be used to act out a story as another form of retelling. Use puppets and other props to enhance the retelling.*

#### GROUP RETELLING GAME

Create a game card set with prompts such as those in the table on page 129. Each member of the group draws one or more cards until all the cards are distributed. Students take turns retelling their assigned parts of the story.

#### STORY SOUVENIRS

You can extend school reading experiences by sending home story souvenirs, simple mementos of a book read in class, to remind the children to retell the story to their parents. Some examples of story souvenirs might be a feather to represent a story about a bird, or a candle for a story about a birthday party. A response form is sent home to inform the parents of the procedure, and for parents to record the children's comments about the book. The students get to keep the souvenir as a memento of the book.

### *Using Retelling to Assess Comprehension*

Retelling should be used as an assessment tool only after students have been taught how to retell a story and what is expected of them. One way to assess a retelling is to use a checklist such as the one found on page 130. Another is to have a copy of the text on hand and highlight elements of the story as the student retells it.

Before the reading, let the student know that you will ask her or him to tell you about the story when finished reading.

After the student has read the story, you might say, "Pretend that I've never heard this story and tell me everything about it," or "Pretend you are telling this story to a friend who has never heard it."

If the retelling is incomplete, you may want to assist the reader to recall additional details. For example, if he or she is having trouble getting started, you might prompt with, "This story is about..."

If a student stops before giving all key information, encourage him or her to continue with prompts such as

- "What comes next?"
- "Then what?"
- "Tell me more about..."
- "What else do you remember?"

There is no reason not to allow students to revisit the text or use pictures to assist their retelling. Remember that the purpose of the retelling is to judge whether students understand the text, not just what they remember from the first reading. If readers have been focusing on decoding during the first reading, they may need to reread certain parts to refresh their memories.

## Summarizing

Summarizing takes retelling a step further, in that it asks the reader to organize, synthesize, and analyze ideas for degree of importance. A summary does not include every detail from the story; instead it provides an overview of key ideas.

One way to teach summarizing is to record students' ideas as they tell all the parts of the story they can remember. Then take a look at the ideas and talk about

*Some tips for using retelling as a comprehension/assessment tool:*

- Teach students how to retell and what the expectations are before reading.
- Scaffold students with prompts or questions if necessary.
- Allow students to revisit the text as they retell.
- Ensure that the texts are not beyond the students' reading level, unless the retelling is from a read-aloud.
- Use props, such as puppets or pictures, to aid retelling.

which ones can go together under a more general statement, and which ones may be unnecessary for an overview. For example, you have just read “The Three Little Pigs” and the students recount the following ideas from the story.

There were three pigs who were brothers.  
They each wanted to build a house.  
The first pig built his house out of straw.  
A wolf came along and blew the house down.  
The second pig built his house out of sticks.  
The wolf blew it down too.  
The third pig built his house out of bricks.  
The wolf tried and tried but he couldn’t blow the house down.  
He tried to come down the chimney.  
The pigs built a fire in the chimney and the wolf landed in a pot of hot water.  
The pigs lived happily ever after.

Talk to the students about which ideas might be combined together and which ones aren’t really necessary to a summary of the story. You may even want to use a scaffold like this: “This story is about ... who.... ” Remind them that you don’t need every detail in a summary, but you must give the key ideas.

This story is about three pigs who wanted to build houses for themselves. The first two pigs built houses out of straw and sticks, and the wolf blew them down. The third pig’s house was made of bricks and the wolf couldn’t blow it down. When the wolf tried to come down the chimney, he landed in a pot of hot water, and that was the end of the wolf.

The summary provides a comprehensive overview of the text, by addressing only the salient points of the story and synthesizing supporting details into more general statements.

## Personal Response

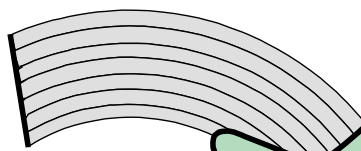
When inviting written responses to reading, you need to model and guide your students in the same way that you teach other concepts. If you want more than a literal retelling, demonstrate for your students what you’re looking for. One way is to think aloud as you model a response. Then you can guide students in the collaborative writing of responses to a shared reading experience. This model helps students know how to respond effectively to a text. The rubric on page 132 is a guideline for teaching and evaluating literary responses.

### *Comparing Responses*

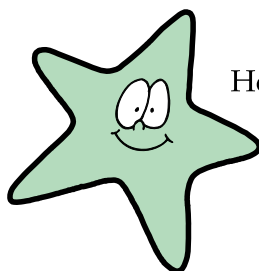
Another effective strategy for teaching literature response is to share three or four samples of responses of differing qualities, and then work with students to identify what makes one better than another.

1. *The Paper Bag Princess* is a story about a princess who was being attacked by a dragon. The prince was supposed to save her, but instead she saved him. And then she wouldn’t marry him.

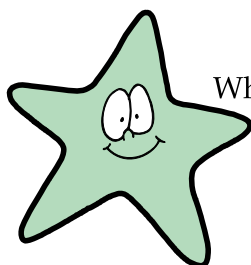
## Story Stars



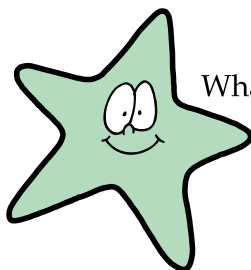
What is the most exciting part?



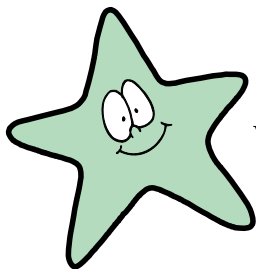
How does the story end?



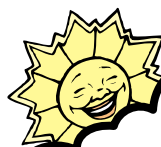
What happened next?



What happened first?



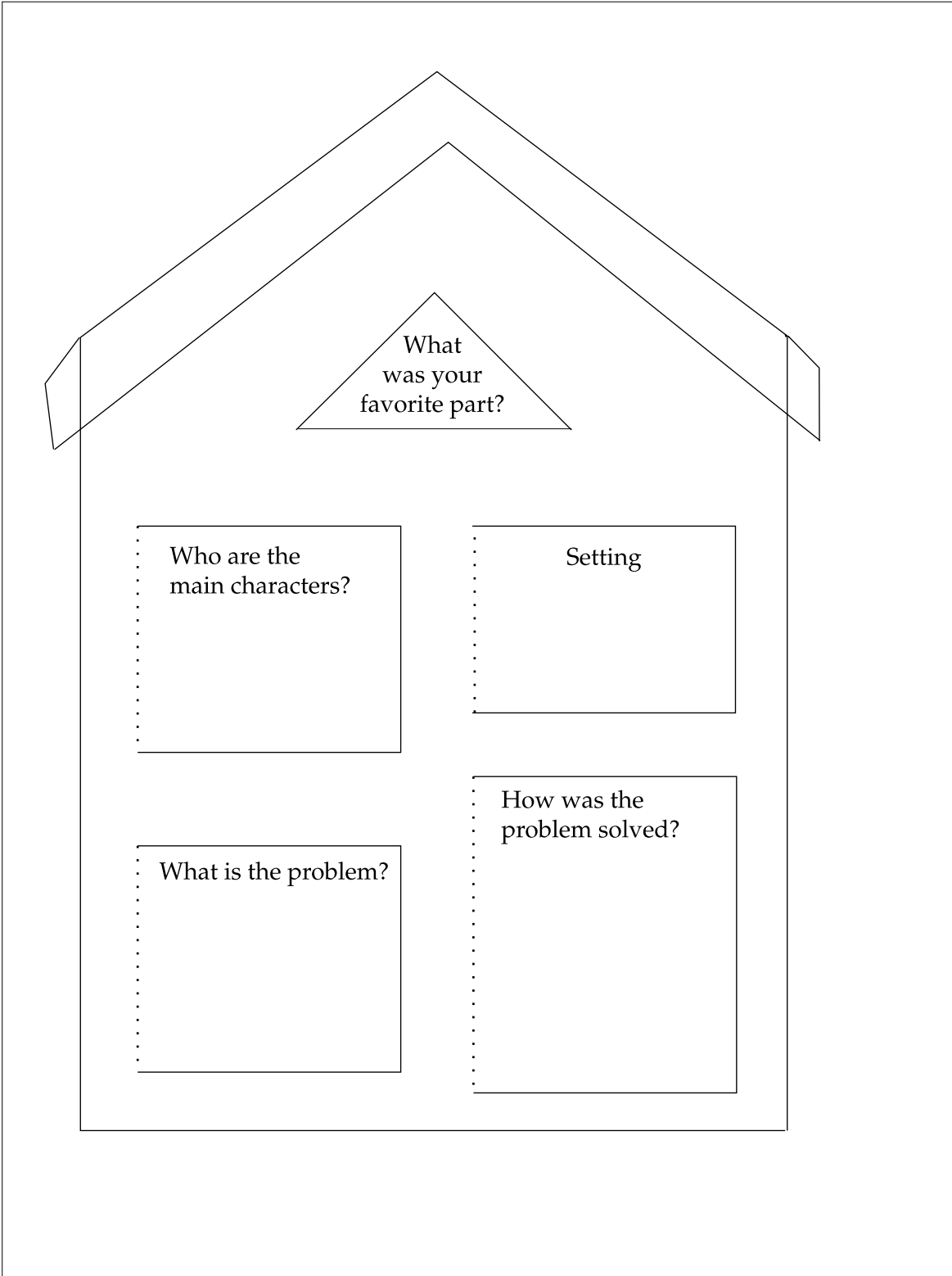
What is the problem?



Author

Title

# Story House



The diagram is a house-shaped template for story analysis. It features a large outer rectangle. Inside, a smaller rectangle is centered. At the top of this inner rectangle is a triangle representing the roof. Below the roof, the interior is divided into four rectangular sections by a horizontal line and a vertical line. Each section contains a question. The roof triangle contains the question 'What was your favorite part?'. The top-left rectangle contains 'Who are the main characters?'. The top-right rectangle contains 'Setting'. The bottom-left rectangle contains 'What is the problem?'. The bottom-right rectangle contains 'How was the problem solved?'. Each of these four sections has a dotted line on its left side, indicating where to write the answer.

What was your favorite part?

Who are the main characters?

Setting

What is the problem?

How was the problem solved?

## Group Retelling Game

1. This story is about...

2. The main character is...

3. His/her problem is...

4. The first thing that happens is...

5. The second thing that happens is...

6. The problem is solved when...

7. At the end of the story...

8. I liked the part where....

## Checklist for Evaluating Retelling

---

*Student's Name:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

---

**Title of Passage:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

### Unaided Retelling

- ☐ Gives general ideas, has gist of the story
  - ☐ Includes all key events
  - ☐ Tells events in proper sequence
  - ☐ Includes important details
  - ☐ Uses words and phrases from the text
  - ☐ Rephrases and uses own words
  - ☐ Makes inferences
  - ☐ Makes connections and personal observations
- 

### Aided Retelling

- ☐ Used general prompts

Used specific questions about

- ☐ Setting
- ☐ Characters
- ☐ Main events
- ☐ Beginning (Problem)
- ☐ Conclusion (Solution)
- ☐ Details/Specific Information



2. *The Paper Bag Princess* is a story about a princess who saved a prince from the dragon instead of the other way around. I thought it was funny because she called Prince Harold a lazy bum.

3. *The Paper Bag Princess* is like a fairy tale because it has a princess and a prince and a dragon. It reminds me of *Prince Cinders* because in that book the characters were also the opposite of what you would expect. I like reading these kinds of books because they are funny and surprise you. You don't know what's going to happen till the end.

4. *The Paper Bag Princess* is a story about how a princess saves a prince from a dragon, then she doesn't want to marry him in the end. What makes it funny is the way the author describes the characters, just the opposite to what you would find in regular fairy tales. The princess is brave and cool but the prince is a loser. The author does a good job of making sure we don't know what's going to happen till the end. I enjoyed reading this book because I couldn't predict what was going to happen.

Have the students read each response and decide which was the most effective and why. Talk about how they can use these models for writing their own responses.

### *Graphic Organizers for Personal Responses*

Here are some ideas for different forms of reading response. The advantage of using graphic organizers is that they provide a scaffold to guide students in their writing.

Be sure to model each of these organizers using a shared, modeled, or interactive writing strategy before expecting students to complete them independently. Ultimately, of course, we want to wean students from reliance on these scaffolds and construct their own responses.

#### SOS: SUMMARY, OPINION, SUPPORT

See the graphic organizer on page 133. In the first box, students retell the key points of the story. In the second box, they give an opinion elicited from the text. Did you like the story or not? Did you agree or disagree with the main idea? In the last box, students provide support for the opinion.

#### OWL: OBSERVE, WONDER, LINK TO LIFE

The OWL strategy (see page 134) invites students to tell what they notice or learned from the story, what they wonder about, and what personal connections they make.

#### TWO-COLUMN NOTES

This simple response format (see page 135) requires readers to respond to specific ideas or quotes from the story. They choose words, sentences, or ideas from the story to write in the left-hand column. Then in the right-hand column, they write their thoughts, questions, and connections relating to those ideas.

#### THE THREE R'S: RETELL, RELATE, RESPOND

In the Three R's Response (see page 136), students start by giving an overview of the story. Then they tell what they relate or connect to. Finally they give a personal response—how they felt, what they agreed with, what their opinion of the text was.

## Rubric for Literature Response

	<i>Exemplary</i>	<i>Very Good</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Needs Help</i>
Reaction to Text	Provides in-depth exploration of own reactions, with thoughtful support from text	Gives simple descriptions of own reactions, with support from text	Describes parts that were “liked” or “disliked” with some support	A simple retelling of story, or description of what was “liked” or “disliked” without support
Making Personal Responses	Makes thoughtful, insightful connections to self, to other texts, and to bigger issues	Makes strong connections to personal experience and to other texts	Makes obvious or mundane personal connections to key ideas	Makes no personal connections, or makes connections unrelated to text
Interpretation of Text	Sophisticated inferences are described and supported with examples from text	Evidence of understanding and reflection on key ideas within the text	Summarizes key ideas in the text	Has trouble identifying key ideas in the text
Insight into Author’s Craft: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• theme</li> <li>• language</li> <li>• characters</li> <li>• mood</li> </ul>	Compares different authors’ styles; notes literary devices such as suspense, point of view	Recognizes and explains elements of craft, such as how the author creates mood	Can recognize some elements of craft, such as character development and interesting language	Is unable to identify elements of style or craft

## SOS Response

**S**ummary

**O**pinion

**S**upport for Opinion

## OWL Response

**O**bserve

What do you notice or remember about the text?

**W**onder

What do you wonder about?

**L**ink to Life

What does the text remind you of?

## Two-Column Notes

<i>Words or ideas from the text</i>	<i>Your own thoughts, questions or connections to those ideas</i>

## Three R's Response

**R**etell the story in your own words.

**R**elate to your own life.

**R**eact with your opinions.